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The Heterogeneous Cristero Identity

By

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Senior Seminar: HST 499
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The Mexican Revolution concluded with the creation of the Mexican Constitution in 1917. The freemason-dominated government produced by the Mexican Revolution sought to establish dominance in the country and limit the power of organizations that threatened the existence and wellbeing of the state. The Catholic Church was one of these organizations, which at times throughout Mexican history, has wielded more power than the government. The 1917 Constitution was an attempt by the government to harshly restrict the influence of the Catholic Church within Mexico and simultaneously limit the power of the clergy. In essence the Mexican Constitution of 1917 took away many of the privileges the Catholic Church once held: it could no longer be recognized politically, nor could it own land, which was the basis of wealth and power. Church-state conflict was no new phenomenon to Mexico. It had caused much separation and resentment between many Mexicans. When this resentment came to a boiling point after the Mexican Revolution, the Cristero Rebellion began.

The rebellion had two basic sides: the government and the *cristeros*. The government was trying to put out this rebellion of Catholic laity and clergy, who called themselves *cristeros*, or 'soldiers of Christ'. The state enlisted the help of *agraristas* to fight. *Agraristas* were peasants who partook in the government land reform programs. Upon receiving land from the government they were called up as militia, and their service would act as payment for their new land. On the other side, a *cristero* was a religious peasant whose way of life was interwoven with the Catholic Church. Clergy also participated as *cristeros*, and used their positions of authority as springboards into *cristero* leadership during the rebellion. Although the term *cristero* has religious meaning, there was a non-religious aspect to it as well. This paper will investigate the heterogeneity of the *cristero* identity.

The Cristero Rebellion took place from 1926 to 1929. During these three short years, many churches were destroyed while both clergy and Cristeros lost their lives protecting their religious freedoms. Their goal was to maintain the status quo of Church dominance within Mexico, which was challenged by the 1917 Constitution. The Constitution itself was very blunt about the role the Catholic Church should play in Mexico. It stated, “Freedom of religious beliefs being guaranteed by Article 24, the standard which shall guide such education shall be maintained entirely apart from any religious doctrine and, based on the results of scientific progress, shall strive against ignorance and its effects, servitudes, fanaticism, and prejudices.”¹ This article called for a direct separation of the Church from the education system. This seriously threatened the Catholic Church because of its historic role in education. The first Catholic missionaries in Mexico established religious schools and educated the converts. These schools eventually became cemented into the very fabric of Mexican society.

It was not until after the Mexican Revolution, that the government established a secular school system. As a result of the 1917 Constitution, many churches began to face restrictions, so they reacted by refusing to administer religious acts. Cristero scholar Mathew Butler mentions, “this refusal of the sacraments to the faithful was a protest against the persecution suffered by the Church under Obregón’s successor, Plutarco Elías Calles, who from 1926 stringently enforced the anticlerical provisions of Mexico’s revolutionary constitution.”² The Church calculated that by not performing sacraments, the “flock” of the church would rise up and demand the government eliminate the anti-Catholic measures. Also, clerics believed this resistance would display to the government the importance of the Catholic Church in Mexican culture and society.

¹ Mexican State, *Mexican Constitution 1917*, title I, ch. 1, art. 3, sec. 1, accessed at <http://www.ilstu.edu/class/hist263/docs/1917const.html>.

² Matthew Butler. *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico's Cristero Rebellion: Michoacán, 1927-29*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 2.

Above all, the suspension of sacraments by the clergy was intended to be a peaceful approach, designed to remind the government of the hegemony enjoyed by the Catholic Church. The ban on sacraments did not achieve the desired response intended by the clergy.

The continued persecution of the Catholic Church forced many priests into hiding which resulted in a mass closing of churches.³ Also, the 1917 Constitution declared, “The law does not recognize any personality in religious groups called churches.”⁴ Furthermore it mentioned that, “The formation of any kind of political group, the name of which contains any word or indication whatever that it is related to any religious denomination, is strictly prohibited. Meetings of a political character may not be held in places of worship.”⁵ On the whole, the 1917 Constitution displayed language that allowed for the subordination of the Church by the state, against the emergence of a fledgling form of nationalism. When it came down to it, the enforcement of law hinged on the administration’s personal view of the type of role the Church should play in the state.

Because of the blatant persecution of the Catholic Church, concerned Catholics formed the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty (LNDLR) in March of 1925. The LNDLR reversed the previous strategy of passive resistance and called for a national uprising on behalf of the Catholic Church to stop the persecution. With the outcry, ¡Vive Cristo Rey! The Cristero Rebellion was born in the following year, 1926.

The rebellion was predominately seen in the central states of Mexico: Michoacán, Jalisco, and Zacatecas. It was a peasant rebellion, and the Church played a crucial role in the areas of the rebellion. The Church was rooted in education and provided sacraments. Also, as a social

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Mexican Constitution 1917.*

⁵ Ibid.

institution, it fostered a sense of community. Needless to say, the Catholic Church played an important role in the lives of peasants and their communities.

Plutarco Elías Calles, the Mexican President 1924-1928, encouraged anticlerical sentiment different from his presidential predecessors, Venustiano Carranza 1917-1920 and Alvaro Obregón 1920-1924, both of whom had anti-clerical legislation on the books, but maintained a coexistence and peace with the church. Calles, however, threatened the Church as well as the peasants' lifestyle. The church that had been so deeply rooted within this stratum faced persecution under the harsh enforcement of the Constitution by the Calles administration. Juan Guitierrez, a Cristero soldier states, "The government jerk! ...They wanted to take away all the good... tear down the temples, kill priests... that is what caused the uprising... Killing priests, closing temples, closing everything, understand? They did not want anything good."⁶ This quote provides a glance into the peasant community and the role of the church. It shows the negative feelings toward the government. Also, it shows how peasants did not view the government actions as justified steps in the nation building of Mexico. The peasants did not only express their frustrations verbally, nor did they continue to play the role of victim. Many of them united under the banner of *¡Vive Cristo Rey!*, and became *cristero* soldiers. One account says, these *cristeros* "...destroyed many of the new public schools... that imparted a rationalist curriculum hostile to the church."⁷ Calles believed in a strong separation between Church and state. The inability of previous administrations to enforce the clear language in the 1917 Constitution provided Calles with an avenue allowing him to secularize Mexican society. The Cristero Rebellion challenged that belief.

⁶ "Cristeros, Soldiers of Christ" produced by Production Squad, directed by Los Caballeros, 14:44 minutes, www.youtube.com, 2006.

⁷ Jurgen Buchenau. *Plutarco Elias Calles and the Mexican Revolution*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, p. 130.

Although the conflict between the church and the government over the enforcement of the constitution took center stage, land reform was a volatile issue also. It became a factor dividing the peasant communities. Jennie Purnell mentions in *Popular Movements and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico* that:

...many peasant communities organized and applied for land under the revolutionary agrarian reform program without attacking the Church or religious practice and without providing military support to the state. Yet... many agrarista peasants explicitly defined themselves as anticlerical, and their personal and political enemies...as Catholics. Other peasants... accepted and adopted this Catholic political identity.⁸

This shows a lack of peasant unity within the peasant class on the issue of land reform and the Catholic Church. Also, the issue of land reform stemming back to the Revolutionary ideas of Emiliano Zapata during the Mexican Revolution of 1910 was strongly felt and represented. The Cristero Rebellion was not as simple as the government versus the Catholics. Actually, Mathew Butler in *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico's Cristero Rebellion*, suggests, "...many Catholics did not rebel... Others thought the Cristeros were little better than thieves because they lived off the land." According to one witness, "they took animals, corn, *tortillas*, *chiles*, everything... I didn't know what they wanted, for me, they were just a shameless rabble"⁹ This social stratification within Catholic Church, and society, nevertheless inhibited unification of the Catholics and eventually limited the success of the Cristero Rebellion. To exploit this class division further, the government would give land to the *agraristas* with the hidden clause that they must fight as militia against the *cristeros* in the region. As Journalist Jim Tuck mentions:

A farmer living north of La Barca at first refused a plot of land offered by the government; he was sure there were strings attached. He was finally persuaded to accept,

⁸ Jennie Purnell. *Popular Movements and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico: The Agraristas and Cristeros of Michoacán*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999, p. 3.

⁹ Butler, p. 210. Interview with Delfina Pérez, Maravatío, 20 Aug. 1997.

and a few days later he and some of his friends were issued rifles. “That’s the price you have to pay,” they were told. “You are now in the service of the government”¹⁰

This was a common way the government would enlist men to fight in local militias against the *cristeros*. Furthermore this trickery created even more of a social division between the masses, especially in rural areas where the struggle between religion and land reform was bittersweet. This schism divided families and communities. Peasants faced crisis of social identity; either they aligned with the Catholic Church or seized the new land offered by government sponsored land reform.

The Cristero Rebellion is seen by many as an event within the greater scale of the Mexican Revolution that began in 1910 and ended with the formation of the 1917 Constitution. The reason for the Rebellion’s alignment with the Revolution is simple. The Cristero Rebellion was a conflict between the church and state; which is not an uncommon theme throughout the years of the Revolution. The Church’s position as the largest landowner in Mexico further fueled debates of agrarian reform especially under Emiliano Zapata who was a revolutionary leader and hero of the southern Mexican states and called for urgent land reform policy in a new independent Mexico. The lack of Constitutional enforcement of early administrations allowed the Catholic Church to continue its grasp on Mexican society and land. It is best to understand the rebellion as a counter-revolutionary phenomenon in the overall view of the Mexican Revolution. This is because of the simple fact that it resulted from the 1917 Revolutionary Constitution.

Scholarship concerning the Cristero Rebellion consists of two main schools of thought. The first primarily views the Rebellion from a Catholic view. These historians argue that the Catholic Church faced unjustified and harsh religious persecution. The second source looks at

¹⁰ Jim Tuck. *The Holy War in Los Altos: A Regional Analysis of Mexico’s Cristero Rebellion*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982, 15.

the rebellion through secular eyes, and determines that government action was righteous because the government was asserting its power and solidifying its rule in a post revolutionary Mexico. This view basically sets the Rebellion against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution and the process of nation building.

One particular secular-Cristero historian is Jean A. Meyer who wrote *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People Between Church and State*. Meyer is a French historian, who views the rebellion from a governmental view. Meyer's view of the revolt as secular shows the enforcement of the 1917 Constitution as a necessary action the government had to take in order to assert their power and control of the post-revolutionary country. Meyer's thesis is the rebellion was an event in the process of nation building within Mexico. Furthermore, the government was justified in its actions against the rebellion, because as Meyer notes, "the state...can admit no power to be superior to it."¹¹

David C. Bailey wrote similarly to Meyer, in his book *¡Vive Cristo Rey! The Cristero Rebellion and the Church-State Conflict in Mexico*. His thesis concludes that the rebellion was the result of the Mexican Government asserting a mandatory separation between politics and piety. Bailey also claims the end of the revolt as a pointless ending that did little to change the current environment in which rebellion had erupted. It left an 'open sore' that would create future church-state conflicts.

Jennie Purnell, a more recent Cristero scholar, in her book, *Popular Movements and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico*, conducts a study about counter-revolutionary movements among the peasant strata of Mexican society under the overarching theme of the Mexican Revolution. Purnell allocates much of her attention to the Cristero Rebellion, and argues that the

¹¹ Jean A. Meyer. *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People Between Church and State 1926-1929*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

psychology of the peasant strata contributes to the counter-revolutionary Cristero Rebellion. She adds to the Cristero study the importance of the peasant class in the grassroots rebellion.

The most recent scholar, Mathew Butler, in his book, *Popular Piety and Political identity in Mexico's Cristero Rebellion*, focuses his view on the Cristero Rebellion on the peasant class much like Purnell. Butler's scholarship is different and unique because he argues the peasants were not all for the church and the *cristeros* as many previous scholars suggest. Butler shows how the peasants themselves were divided between the *cristeros* and the *agraristas*. Butler's thesis is that religion was a self-directed component of life, and changed along with societal and political changes. He goes further by suggesting that in the context of the Cristero Rebellion and post-revolutionary Mexico, there were different factions of religious identity that were shaped by different political, societal and geographical factors. These factions were either for or against the current relationship between the church and state, and as Butler states, they either "accommodated or resisted the post-revolutionary state."¹² Butler is also the only Cristero scholar to suggest an alternate form of *cristero* other than that of a Catholic who maintained the view of government religious persecution. In his essay "The 'Liberal' Cristero: Ladislao Molina and the Cristero Rebellion in Michoacán, 1927-9" he brings to light a leader in the state of Michoacán, who does not directly identify with the basic *cristero* mold.

Most of these Cristero scholars generally determine that the Cristero Rebellion failed due to a lack of strong, lasting leadership, and unification among those leaders. This is not to say that strong leadership was not present. The following case study of Anacleto González Flores shows it was, however the inability to create leaders like González on a national level with national cohesion is the issue concerning leadership and the rebellion. Beyond that, the second case study of Ladislao Molina from Michoacán, will argue the Cristero Rebellion was not limited

¹² Butler, 13.

to a conflict between the Church and the state. Rather, as in Molina's case, it was a mask used to further a personal and selfish agenda. Therefore, the Cristero Rebellion was not constricted to the mold of a conflict between church and state, but also served as a scapegoat for individuals like Molina who used the rebellion as a disguise enabling them to maintain and sometimes ascend in their social positions within the Mexican society. These studies argue the ambiguity of the *cristero* identity.

The most common feature of the rebellion is the pretense that it was a Church/state conflict. Geographically, the conflict was primarily in central Mexico. One particular region, Los Altos is located in the northeastern region of the state of Jalisco. The region is also known as *Las tierras flacas*, which means "the lean lands". The novelist Agustín Yañez who used the phrase as the title of a 1962 publication first coined this phrase.¹³ The region of Los Altos is important to the Cristero Rebellion because of its ethnicity and strong religiosity. The ethnic makeup of the region is strikingly white, and consists of people with blonde hair and blue eyes. Tuck suggests the presence of German and Austrian ancestry in the region, which would account for the predominately white ethnic makeup of the region.¹⁴ Because of the social constructs of Mexico and ethnic diversity, these people of a completely different skin tone were still considered Mexicans because of their common identity of being Spanish speakers.

As the Mexican Revolution waned, and the 1917 Constitution was drafted, passed and enacted, many people within the Los Altos region began to feel religiously persecuted by the new liberal government, especially under the enforcement of Plutarco Elias Calles. This enforcement became known as the Calles Laws. These laws were enacted to enforce the anti-

¹³ Tuck, 2.

¹⁴ Ibid, 3. Tuck describes the pre-Revolutionary period in the area of Los Altos. He suggests the heritage of the people as being "Spanish Creole, Basque, French and probably Germanic." He places this in the context of Mexico's stint as a colony of imperial Spain and under the command of the Hapsburg Prince, Maximilian I in the nineteenth century.

clerical legislation of the 1917 Constitution that previous administrations had wisely left alone. The Cristero Rebellion put Calles' desire for a secular government and strong nationalism into check.¹⁵ When the rebellion officially began in 1926, most people in the region defined themselves as *cristeros*. This mass identification of cristero in the regions sparks much interest, because not all Catholics were *cristeros* in fact, "... only a small minority of Catholics participated."¹⁶ The question then posed is why so many people of the Los Altos region aligned themselves with the *cristero* mindset. A look into religion may begin to answer such a question.

It is important to recognize the nature of Catholicism within Mexico. Catholicism, unlike Protestantism, is more accepting of indigenous religions. Pre-Columbian Mexico enjoyed a polytheistic religion of the indigenous people. Upon Spanish colonization, a form of European Catholicism was introduced into the polytheistic realm. Many indigenous people rejected this new religion, and struggled with the new concepts. Here, this phenomenon is seen, "the Franciscan and Dominican friars who brought Christianity to Mexico sought to impose their own theological conceptions, but the Indians resisted passively until in the end the native ways won out."¹⁷ This acknowledgement by early Cristero scholar Robert E. Quirk has some substance; however, the native ways did not entirely win out as he suggests. Mexican Catholicism can be interpreted to be a facade representing the polytheistic culture and religion of the pre-Columbian times. This was possible because the Catholic Church was more concerned with papal allegiance than a molded brand of Catholicism. As generations passed, this special Mexican Catholicism evolved to include nearly all people of Mexico. This coupled with interbreeding, created a unique brand of religion. Whichever *brand* of Catholicism the inhabitants of Los Altos practiced

¹⁵ Buchenau, 130.

¹⁶ Quirk, Robert E. *The Mexican Revolution and the Catholic Church 1910-1929*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973, 188.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

is irrelevant; what is, however, is the level of religiosity seen in this locality. Los Altos was very devout in its Catholicism, and religion played an important social role for them. It was interwoven into the very fabric of their lives. It encompassed their education, local economics and local politics. It also served as an important social anchor, which held together the region and united them as one under the religious banner of *¡Vive Cristo Rey!*

The strong level of religiosity in Los Altos was matched by a strong level of leadership. Anacleto González Flores was the man who became the essential leader, not only in the region, but also in the greater Cristero Rebellion. He is noted as, "... a leader and hero of the *cristero* rebellion, [he] was an unusual man."¹⁸ González was an incredibly bright child, an attribute that would attest to his future accomplishments. He was not religious growing up until he saw the light at the age of seventeen.¹⁹ González understood the importance of education; therefore, "he plunged into such diverse fields as teaching, political action, journalism, and law."²⁰ While attending law school he taught history in local private schools. Because of his selection of professions and his religious passion, González found himself in the middle of debate on Calles' constitutional enforcement. González gained much popularity among his students, and earned the nickname *El Maestro*.²¹ He was an early member, advocate, and recruiter for the Catholic Association of Mexican Youth or ACJM, which would turn out many future *cristeros*. He also was an original founder of Unión Popular (UP), which was an organization political and civic responsibility, inspired by the *Volksverein* of Germany.²²

¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹⁹ Ibid., 18.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jean A. Meyer. *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People Between Church and State 1926-1929*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, 33.

²² Ibid. The Catholics of Germany founded this organization after the government-sponsored persecution of the Catholic Church under Otto von Bismarck. This persecution was known as the *Kulturkampf* 1871. Thematically it is similar to the Cristero Rebellion due to the increasing secularization of government and society.

González's leadership involvement began to focus more and more onto events being debated among other leaders. The primary topic of debate was the 1917 Constitution and the open persecution of the Catholic Church under the Calles Laws. In retaliation to these anti-clerical ideals González believed in a passive and ideological approach. He was enormously against violence in any form and would always opt for diplomatic solutions. In his mind, it would take a true calling from God to change that mindset. He believed in an eternal revolution in which people were martyrs who "died on their knees."²³ Therefore, in retaliation to the strict anti-clerical legislation of the liberal government, González advocated for a passive resistance approach.

González's pacifist views of martyrdom were unrealistic in the Revolutionary culture of Mexico. Within the UP there were continual calls toward action against the government and the persecution it employed. The leader of the UP rallied support by acting on what the masses said. Here is one example of what the people of the UP were saying among themselves:

Better to die than deny Christ the King, without fearing martyrdom or death, in whatever form it might come! Sons, do not be cowards! Up and defend a just cause! That is what mothers were saying to their sons. At the same time, everybody was repeating in chorus the cries of "Long Live Christ the King!" and "Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe!"²⁴

These murmurs among UP members were hard to overlook. Rebellion was eminent, and González faced an internal identity crisis. He could either continue his ideologies of pacifism and hopes of martyrdom, or he could take a more direct and aggressive approach similar to the one those around him were advocating for.

Eventually González changed his mind and advocated for the rebellion. This was not however, a change in consciousness, but rather support for his brothers in Christ. Once González openly supported the rebellion he rose into high prominence among his peers and fellow

²³ Ibid., 49.

²⁴ Jean A. Meyer, 49. J. J. F. Hernández, MS: 'Tierra de Cristeros'.

cristeros. This is a true testament to his great capacity as a leader, and he became the very embodiment of the Catholic Church in the region. This was exceptionally important as it provided a personality and face to the rebellion within the region. González's capabilities as a leader were seen as, "He was the head of the LNDR in Jalisco, president of the Unión Popular, and leader of a secret organization called the 'U'.²⁵ He was also chief of military operations, commissioning Cristero officers and laboring to coordinated strategy."²⁶ The many leadership-sombreros González wore displayed his leadership ability. He was such a fantastic leader that the government soon recognized him as the head leader of the revolt in the region, and focused much of their efforts on his capture. This forced González into hiding in Guadalajara at the house of a Doctor by the name of Vargus González, who sympathized with the *cristeros*. It would not be until after his capture and death that people would recognize his true leadership capacity.

There are many stories surrounding how Anacleto González Flores was captured, this is the general overview of what happened. There was a young man who was a member of the Catholic Youth organization called ACJM²⁷ who knew González personally and not only his location, but also the location of several other high-ranking *cristeros* in the region. His name was Salvador Alvarez Patrón. The story goes that an older gentlemen came to Alvarez's residency with a story about wanting to help the cause with rebels of his own, but he needed autonomy to be granted by either González or one of the other high ranking *cristeros*. Alvarez gobbled the story up and divulged the whereabouts of González in Guadalajara, and other officials also in Guadalajara and Mexico City. After Alvarez finished telling the old man, members of the secret police who were waiting just outside the door arrested him. Interestingly, the old man fit the demographic of a person who would be trustworthy to Alvarez, a resident of Los Altos. One

²⁵ Union of Mexican Catholics

²⁶ David C. Bailey. *¡Viva Cristo Rey!*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974, 139.

²⁷ González was an original member of the ACJM

story recounts, "...he [Alvarez] spotted him immediately as a typical *alteño* rancher. The visitor was fair skinned and blue-eyed and his partially unbuttoned shirt revealed a wooden crucifix resting on a hairy chest."²⁸ González was arrested April 1, 1927 in Guadalajara at his safe house. Ironically, it was the unique demographic and ethnic make up of the Los Altos region that hailed the great leader Anacleto González Flores, and also was used against him to destroy him.

González, and those captured with him, were tortured an extreme amount. González himself was subject to more harsh treatment than those he was incarcerated with. "He was beaten, hung up by his thumbs, had the soles of his feet lacerated y a razor blade, and his shoulder broken by a rifle butt."²⁹ Throughout the entirety of his torture he was silent and never gave up any information to his assailants. He was executed the same day as his capture: "At noon on April 1, all four were executed."³⁰ In his moment of despair, with his dying breath, González cried out, "I die, but God does not die. *¡Viva Cristo Rey!*"³¹

What the Mexican government had hoped would quickly end the revolt; the death of González, in the end only killed a man. A man who was a leader and a successor needed to be named in his place. "Anacleto Gonzáles Flores... was replaced by two men: Andrés Nuño... was responsible for the UP; and Miguel Gómez Loza, appointed Civil Governor of Jalisco."³² Neither of them lasted more than a couple of years.

In review, González was an intelligent and an extremely capable leader of the Rebellion. His death was tragic, but did not put an end to the rebellion. That end did not come until 1929. His leadership was unique to the entirety of the event because it was the best seen throughout the

²⁸ Tuck, 67.

²⁹ Ibid., 70.

³⁰ Bailey, 139.

³¹ Tuck, Navarrete, Heriberto, S.J. "*Por Dios y Por la Patria*": *Memorias de mi participación en la deesa de la libertad de conciencia y culto durante la persecución religiosa en México de 1926 a 1929*, 2d ed. Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1964.

³² Meyer, 150.

rebellion. Had he evaded martyrdom the rebellion may have been successful. However, due to the incredible lack of leadership that was unable to live up to his example, it failed. Pertaining to location, the Lost Altos region of Jalisco was undoubtedly unique to its surroundings. The demographics coupled with the inimitable brand of Catholicism aforementioned, answers the questions surrounding the people of the region, and their level of religiosity. Anacleto González Flores was a hero of the rebellion, a true leader and an example of other members of the Los Altos region. His death was viewed as martyrdom, and was canonized as a saint by the papacy in 2004.³³

González's life was in direct alignment of what it meant to be a *cristero*; his saintly morals were righteous. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Ladislao Molina from Michoacán, and he was an egotistical maniac whose selfish agenda trumped all other social rules or morals. His blatant disregard for overarching *cristero* authority categorized him as a loose cannon, and his actions in the field earned him a frightful reputation.

When Molina was a child, his family began to acquire land, especially during the Porfiriato Regime of 1876-1911. It is noted that, "On 1 July 1900, Arcadio Molina purchased the first of many plots in pueblo."³⁴ At the death of Ladislao's father, the Molina estate "included nine hundred head of livestock, mainly sheep and cattle, but also beasts of burden. The total value of the...goods was 11,940 pesos"³⁵ and was divided up among the surviving family. Fatherless, the sons began a life of violence, including drunken incidents with neighbors and

³³ Payne, Susan. "87 new causes for sainthood promulgated today in Vatican." Catholic News Agency. http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/87_new_causes_for_sainthood_promulgated_today_in_vatican/.

³⁴ Matthew Butler. "The 'Liberal' Cristero: Ladislao Molina and the Cristero Rebellion in Michoacán, 1927-9." *Journal of Latin America Studies*, 31, no. 3 (1999): p. 651.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Archivo del Registro Público, Morelia, (henceforth ARP), Ventas, Pátzcuaro, tomo 7/registro 1435/fojas 400-8. "Sucesión testada a bienes del Sr. Arcadio Molina, quien falleció en esta ciudad el día 5 de abril de 1907".

revolvers,³⁶ and as one community member recalls they were, "...tricking poor Indians and buying their plots of land...the aggrieved dare not defend their rights...Molina threatens them with violence or rides roughshod over them in court with his money and influence. Soon he will drive the inhabitants before him with the lash."³⁷ The bullying role the Molina family played within this locality of Michoacán is important to Ladislao's future as a *cristero*, especially due to the family's lack of religiosity before and during the conflict.

Because of their increasing bullying role, the Molina family began to grow in resources and capital. With this exponential growth, also meant a need of a capable work force. In true capitalist fashion, the family began to rely on the bullied Indians for manpower. All in all, the Molina's ability to rise in power and landownership was a result of their ruthless attitude toward those around them, most notably the Indian population. Changes of land reform policy by different presidential administrations aided them additionally.

The Molinas were true liberals, and supported those in government who maintained their dominant role in Michoacán. When Obregón came to the presidency in the election of 1920, Molina chose to endorse him due to his liberal stance and military ruthlessness.³⁸ This endorsement gave Molina added influence within his locality, and the local government, which he helped to overthrow with the behind-the-door blessing of Obregón. This overthrow was because the local government in Michoacán "sought to eliminate him with a rushed agrarian reform."³⁹ This was Molina's first encounter with military leadership, which he enjoyed because it was institutionalized violence, and added to his power and influence.

³⁶ Ibid., 653.

³⁷ Ibid., AGHPM, Hijuelas, libro 9/fojas 61-2. Calario Custo to Aristeo Mercado, Cuanajo, 25 May 1906.

³⁸ Ibid., 656.

³⁹ Ibid., 658.

The end of Obregón's presidency brought an end to Molina's government endorsement. The following president, Plutarco Elías Calles, along with his anti-clerical enforcement and agrarian reform, posed a serious threat to Molina and his way of life. Molina was threatened because the system in which he and his family was able to flourish under for nearly two generations was beginning to change. Molina viewed Calles' change in policy and enforcement as a personal attack upon his livelihood as a member of the small land-owning middle class. When the Cristero Rebellion began in 1926, Molina seized the opportunity to align himself with the movement to fight for his ulterior motives. Throughout the rebellion, Molina had a blatant disregard for the LNDLR (the rebellion's attempt at centralized leadership). One LNDLR delegate from Michoacán is quoted as saying; "Ladislao Molina refused to become one of us, claiming that he distrusts us amongst other things. Yet he demands that we provide him with all manner of assistance."⁴⁰ Molina's rogue status was becoming a threat to the rebellion, and his battle tactics were leaning increasingly towards terrorism.

Molina's violent past coupled with his bullying and superiority complex, created the perfect concoction for a ruthless rebel. There is one instance while Molina was hiding in the mountains. It is recounted by a descendant of the victims that Molina would randomly venture down into the village and release his anger. "In 1927 the school teacher in Yoricostio, Michoacán, Moisés Zamora, was half-hung, bayoneted, and shot by the rebels."⁴¹ This was not the most depraved of Molina's actions. He also, attacked and burned villages, held public executions of *agraristas*,⁴² and robbed accordingly. Molina strongly disliked the *agraristas*

⁴⁰ Ibid., ALNDLR, caja 2/folio 56/inventario I, José Tello, Morelia, 3 Aug. 1927.

⁴¹ Ibid., Cortés, Raúl Arreola, *Tacámbaro, Carácuaro, Nocupétaro, Turicato* (Mexico, 1979), pp. 254-7. David Raby, "Los Principios de la Educación Rural en México: El Caso Michoacán, 1915-1929", *Historia Mexicana*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1973), p. 574.

⁴² Ibid., ARAN-DM, Huiramba, Ampliación, expediente 18540/foja 184, Ing. Vargas Lugo to Sub. Srio. de Agricultura y Fomento, 15 March 1928. Interview with Jesus Sagrero Dominguez, Huiramba, 4 Nov. 1997. Jesus Sagrero's father and uncle were among those executed.

because they were the embodiment of Calles' land reform. In a way, Molina was taking his frustrations on Calles out on the *agraristas*, whom in Molina's eyes were little less than whores of the administration. Overall, Molina's violent background and nature were key in understanding his leadership and the depraved actions his band of rebels took.

Molina's end was egotistical, just as his entire life had been. While in hiding, a group of federal troops surrounded him, and he committed suicide, rather than face his captors. His death was admittedly, a loss of a strong leader within the region. However, his depravity was, at long last, brought to an end.

Molina's control of nearly four hundred men was the largest in the region.⁴³ It showed his ability as a leader. Nevertheless, his inability to work cohesively with the LNDR supports the theory that the rebellion failed due to a lack of unity among the factions. More importantly, the use of the Cristero Rebellion, by Molina, was a way to selfishly justify the preservation of his way of life. This is a consequence of his background and influence within Michoacán.

In conclusion, the Cristero Rebellion was a counter-revolutionary event of the Mexican Revolution. The post-Revolutionary liberal government viewed the revolt as a way to secure itself in Mexico, apart from the influence of the church.⁴⁴ This was very important to the future success of Mexico on a federal level. From the clergy's viewpoint, as seen by the example of Anacleto González Flores, the rebellion was a religious persecution and a great social injustice. As Bishop Pascual Díaz, a bishop who was expelled by the Calles laws, notes, "For it is one

⁴³ Ibid., 664.

⁴⁴ Levey, Daniel, and Gabriel Szekely. *Mexico: Paradoxes of Stability and Change*. 2nd ed. Boulder: Westview Press, 1987, p. 42.

thing to separate Church and State; it is another to subject one of them to the other by law.”⁴⁵

This is what the 1917 Constitution did.

Furthermore, the Cristero Rebellion was used by some like Ladislao Molina, as a means of advancing a personal agenda. In other words, Molina did not identify as a *cristero*, who was fighting because of religious persecution; rather, he sought involvement in the revolt to maintain his status within the society. His liberal views were congruent to some governmental policies, however, when Calles turned his attention on land reform that brought the fight to Molina’s doorstep. The policies of Calles threatened Molina’s status and landholdings, both of which he would not give up without a fight. His view and treatment of *agraristas* is testimony to his resistance. Although the Cristero Rebellion provided him with an excellent opportunity to rebel and fight for his selfish way of life, he and the rebellion failed.

By analyzing the leadership and localities of the revolt, an understanding is gained into the psychology of the *cristero* side of the rebellion. In the case of González and the Los Altos region of Jalisco, religion was a way of life. It was weaved into the social framework of the area. Demographics, and ethnic make up of the region contributed to this religious fervor. Also, the European brand of Catholicism made Los Altos different than other forms of Catholicism around Mexico, which incorporated native paganism. Concerning Michoacán, Molina flourished in a liberal society where bullying and intimidation served as tools to prominence. The land holdings of the Molina family made certain a close eye was kept on the government’s view of land reform. Molina’s support of Obregón was contingent upon the administration’s enforcement of conservative land policies. As Calles came to power, a shift in the government’s stance warranted Molina’s rejection of formal policy because it threatened his way of life and status.

⁴⁵ Díaz, Pascual. "The Policy of the Government is Anti-Religious." In *Problems in Latin American Civilization: The Meaning of the Mexican Revolution*, Charles C. Cumberland, 24-28. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1967.

Thus, Molina's entrance into the Cristero Rebellion was not for religious purposes, but acted as an avenue to further his exploitation in Michoacán. Overall, the Cristero Rebellion had a heterogeneity aspect to it as the cases of González and Molina show. They were both religious and liberal *cristeros*.

In the end the rebellion was concluded in June of 1929. U.S. ambassador Dwight D. Morrow used diplomacy as a way of bringing this conflict to a close. His conclusion was in the guise of a peace treaty between the two foes. This is known as the accord (*los arreglos*) they were "...the result of two years of negotiations between the clerics and the state."⁴⁶ After the accord had been made, the rebellion was called off by Archbishop Ruiz y Flores of Michoacán. He also "ordered the league (LNDLR) to cease all its political and military activities."⁴⁷ As the rebellion fizzled out, many Cristeros wondered what was accomplished. Purnell notes, "The agreement between Church and state did not reform or modify any of the existing anticlerical laws or constitutional provisions. Nor did the state provide any guarantees that religious practice would be tolerated..."⁴⁸ In other words, the Constitution of 1917 remained the same and anticlerical laws were still in effect. Furthermore, after *los arreglos* was finalized, many clerics condemned the rebellion, and this "caused great bitterness among the cristero rebels."⁴⁹ It seemed as though they had fought for nothing. The Cristero Rebellion was unsuccessful due to a lack of organizational leadership and social support, and many scholars agree with this paradigm.

The failure of the Cristero Rebellion is in direct relation to leadership, and the psychological mindset of revolting areas. The inability to create a unified organization that controlled the leaders of the factions ultimately doomed the rebellion. Molina is a prime example

⁴⁶ Purnell, 90.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 91.

of leaders who could not be controlled by the LNDLR. This is not to say strong leadership was not present. The study of González determines he was more than just a capable leader, but the lack of personalities like González, supports this argument. What can definitely be concluded is that the *cristero* identity was not merely Catholics fighting for their religious freedoms. The involvement of Molina in the revolt shows how the *cristero* identity encompassed other individuals with differing motives. Thus showing how the *cristero* identity was heterogeneous in nature.

The ambiguity surrounding the role of religion in government will always be present in society, and subject to change. The Cristero Rebellion depicts an extreme example where lives were lost, and communities torn apart. Effects of the Cristero Rebellion were still seen within Mexico even after the conclusion of the conflict in 1929. In the 1930s the government continued its constitutional enforcement by restricting and even killing priests. Events like these do not have winners or losers, but merely an irreconcilable difference in ideology.

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